

The Broken Promise of Sarasota 2050

A Betrayal of the Public Trust

UPDATE: *After this article was written, the Florida Department of Community Affairs strongly objected to the amendment to strip environmental standards out of the first Sarasota 2050 Village development. In response, County staff has proposed to try to satisfy the state by restoring the Greenway “thumb” for now and allowing the developer to seek its removal at a later stage of development which will not be subject to state review. The proposals to remove the Greenbelt buffers essentially remain although they too may be weakened, as well as the proposal for a four lane road through the development. The final adoption hearing on the amendment is scheduled before the County Commission on Thursday, April 29, 2010 at 9 am at the north County Administrative Building. Additionally, since this article was written, developer consultant Hank Fishkind and other pro-development advocates have begun to label Sarasota 2050 a “failure” unless the public interest protections in the plan are scrapped.*

The Sarasota County Commission’s controversial Sarasota 2050 Plan was supposed to be a balance. The County abandoned the I-75 barrier to eastern urban sprawl which had held for decades, opening the rural lands to intense urban development.

In return, the Commissioners promised the public that developers would be required to make certain sacrifices as trade-offs, including enhanced environmental protections.

That is now an empty, broken promise. Again, a developer gains and the public loses.

Two of the most important trade-offs in the 2050 Plan were preserved greenbelt buffers all around each of the new eastern developments, called Villages, and the developers’ preservation of certain environmental features as broad and extensive greenways.

On July 8, the County Commission voted 3 to 2 to amend the 2050 Plan to repeal those requirements for the first proposed Village, a huge 5,500-unit development east of I-75 and south of University Parkway, at the demand of its developer, Schroeder-Manatee. It also voted to replace a two-lane road through the development with a four-lane one.

The developer threatened not to develop its Village unless the environmental protections were repealed. Actually, it probably was just an empty threat, as its only other choice would be five acre homesites or a low-density conservation subdivision, at much less profit.

In the words of County Commissioner Jon Thaxton, the County has “left the heart of the program” intended by Sarasota 2050 and destroyed the “balance” by which it allowed greatly increased densities east of the Interstate in return for measures to protect the public interest.

The approval reversed a vote a month earlier by which the amendment was disapproved on a 3 to 2 vote, after County Commissioner Carolyn Mason reversed her position and asked for a re-vote. Although that came after private meetings with her by developer official Rex Jensen, Commissioner Mason stated that she was not “pressured” to change her vote. County Commissioner Nora Patterson, although favoring some of the changes but not others, was the second vote with Jon Thaxton both times against the amendment.

Commissioners Shannon Staub and Joe Barbetta at all points strongly supported of all of the developer’s changes, arguing that they are needed to give the developer its desired “flexibility”.

Indeed, Joe Barbetta went even further, stating that 2050 is a “bad plan” because it contains too many requirements and restrictions on developers. This is a complete reversal of his vote against 2050 as a County Planning Commissioner on the basis that it was not strict enough. The shift is reflective of his change, since being elected as a growth control advocate in 2006, into the County Commission’s strongest supporter of uncontrolled development.

This is all as if it is somehow a good thing to have intense urban development east of I-75, so much so that we have to sacrifice the environment in order to get it.

The approval of the amendment went against negative recommendations of both the County staff and County Planning Commission.

The Plan amendment is now at the state’s growth management agency, the Department of Community Affairs, for review. It will then return for another public hearing and final vote of the County Commission in a few months.

The Comprehensive Plan amendments would destroy existing requirements for Greenbelts around the proposed Village. They are presently required by Policy VOS 5.1 of the Sarasota 2050 plan, which provides, “The purposes of establishing a Greenbelt around each Village and each Hamlet is to help define these as separate and compact communities.” It requires that each Village shall include “a Greenbelt that is a minimum of 500 feet wide around the perimeter of the Developed Area that preserves Native Habitats, supplements natural vegetation, and protects wildlife within the area.”

The amendments would entirely eliminate the requirements for a Greenbelt along the northern and southern sides of the Village and would reduce another Greenbelt, on the eastern side, from 500 feet to 200 feet in width. (No Greenbelt is required on the western side because the developer got an exemption in the original Plan for land adjoining I-75).

The amendments would also amend the Sarasota 2050 map to remove a large 156 acre “thumb” near Gum Slough from the required Greenway preservation area. County staff recommended against this change, stating that it would violate the requirement of Policy GS 1.1 of Sarasota 2050 that the Greenway include all wetlands connected to a named flow way (in this case, Gum Slough). The developer has admitted in writing that the “thumb” does have wetlands connected to a named flow way.

County staff stated that the County cannot legally remove the area on the basis that the wetland is only seasonal, not of the highest quality and connected to Gum Slough by an artificial ditch, as argued by the developer. That is because the plan does not require the preservation only of year-round, high quality wetlands with natural connections, it requires that all wetlands connected to a named flow way, by whatever means, be preserved as Greenway. Jon Thaxton objected strenuously to this sort of reinterpretation of the 2050 standards, stating that if only the highest quality wetlands are preserved, all wetlands are threatened.

Already, the County previously eliminated the need for the developer to preserve 744 acres adjoining the “thumb” as Greenway by buying the development rights from the developer with taxpayer funds, and by adopting a measure which will allow the developer as much density as it wants with little or no transfer of development rights from a Greenway. The County also previously agreed to spare the developer the cost of four-laning Fruitville Road to handle its traffic, by adding it to taxpayer-funded County projects.

The new Plan amendments would also allow Schroeder-Manatee to change a proposed Village road from two lanes to four lanes, in violation of the concept of Sarasota 2050 to create roads for internal movements rather than regional through traffic.

The Planning Commission had recommended against the amendments to remove the southern Greenbelt and narrow another one. County Planning staff also recommended against these two changes, as well as the removal of the Greenway “thumb”.

The amendments were opposed at the hearings or in writing by Control Growth Now, the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, ManaSota-88, the Sarasota County Council of Neighborhood Associations and The Fruitville 2010 Alliance.

Control Growth Now took the lead in urging the Department of Community Affairs to find, as it did, that the amendment would violate state law by creating internal inconsistencies in the County Comprehensive Plan and because they are unsupported by data and analysis.